

Bills on the state and federal level have boosted efforts by Highland Park, Highwood, Glenview and North Chicago to ease the financial burden on local schools expected when military housing for Great Lakes Naval Air Station is renovated or rebuilt.

"We're very happy to have military families in our community ... but we're looking for ways to keep our commitment at a level base and not increase our responsibilities," explained Glenview Village President Kerry Cummings.

A bill introduced last week in the U.S. House by Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, and a companion bill sponsored by Illinois Democratic Senators Barack Obama and Richard Durbin, seeks to increase federal education aid for the local school districts that educate students of military families.

Separately, a bill sponsored by state Sen. Terry Link, D-30th, which the Illinois Senate passed March 9, establishes how to tax the leased military housing units, which had been tax free under Navy ownership. The formula outlined in Link's bill would require higher tax payments than Forest City Military Communities, the Navy's development partner, had anticipated, and threatens the viability of its \$250 million partnership with the Navy, the developer said.

The bill "in our view, would fail to serve the interests of the cities, the schools and the Navy

families," said John Ehle, a Forest City senior vice president.

How to replace hundreds of dilapidated housing units while mitigating the surge in the number of students coming from the new housing has been debated by local, state and federal officials since the Navy launched its plan to partner with a private developer in late 2004.

The arrangement in place when the Navy signed an agreement with Forest City last December provided for a total of 1,658 residences through demolition, renovation and new construction: 250 in Glenview, 284 at Fort Sheridan, 1,100 in North Chicago and 24 in Indiana.

Glenview, Highland Park and Highwood officials have worried that the higher occupancy rates and the increased number of bedrooms within the units will mean more children of military personnel will be enrolling in their schools, further straining facilities and district finances.

North Chicago officials have the opposite concerns, because the number of military units there will drop. If students of military families drop below 30 percent of the North Chicago school district's total enrollment, it would stand to lose \$7 million in annual federal education aid.

Kirk's bill is aimed at alleviating all the school districts' concerns about the education aid, which currently provides \$6,300 per North Chicago student and around \$700 for each Glenview, Highland Park or Highwood student the local districts educate.

If passed, Kirk's bill would count as one group all the students of military personnel training at Great Lakes, rather than separating them by school district. That way, each district would be reimbursed at the higher aid level -- \$6,300 per student -- and North Chicago would continue to meet the enrollment threshold.

"I can clearly see how everybody can come out with a win here: aid for the schools, better housing for families in uniform and a stable future where no one's federal aid is threatened," Kirk said.

Link's bill, which is on hold in the Illinois House, "was meant to get the Navy back to the table," Glenview Village Manager Todd Hileman said.

Hileman said a meeting was expected to be set up this week or next week to discuss once again how many housing units would be built in each community.

Navy officials "are studying the issue right now as far as whether to reduce the number of homes in Glenview and Highland Park and relocate them to North Chicago, and actually weighing the aspects of potentially constructing a project in a different location," Hileman said.

"I think (the Navy) is covering all of (its) bases, not wanting to restart the project."

Highland Park Mayor Michael Belsky said Link's bill was not intended to sink the Navy's partnership with Forest City.

"Our issue is not with them," Belsky said. "We've had to accelerate our efforts" to mitigate the negative impacts because demolition work has already started at Fort Sheridan and North Chicago.